

A Spotlight on Special Education

August, 2015

Dear Parents/Guardians,

It is with great enthusiasm that I welcome you to the 2015-2016 school year.

As the newly appointed Director of Special Education, I am proud to be part of an outstanding school district that encourages each child to grow and excel. I have already had the opportunity to experience successful inclusive classrooms, where students with disabilities are free to learn at their own pace, with accommodations and alternative assessment strategies in place to meet their unique needs. I am enjoying being part of a creative school district that offers a superb staff, a challenging curriculum, and positive relationships with our parents/guardians and children.

Over the course of my career, I have worked with students at almost every grade level during critical transition points: transitioning in and out of special education, moving into and returning from out of district programs, and graduating from one grade to another. I have consulted with families and to staff regarding academic curricular issues, classroom accommodations and modifications, behavioral management, and social skill building. Thoughtful and creative transitional planning has always been an essential component for providing students with the opportunity to achieve to the best of their ability.

While I am a believer in inclusion, I also believe that respecting individual needs is paramount. This is a delicate balance. As such, there must continue to be focused and intentional thought around children's learning and the measurement of their progress in the least restrictive environment. Being part of a team process at every developmental level requires establishing priorities, developing practical options for students and their families, raising the academic bar for achievement and anticipating measurable outcomes. When making critical decisions in the interests of our students, teaming and working together among parents, teachers (regular and special education), and clinicians are essential for ameliorating differences in children's learning.

With that in mind, the topic of collaboration between regular and special education is important to all of us. As parents and educators, the issue of partnerships - how they are established and maintained over time - is a constant priority as we work together towards our common goal of educating our children. For all teachers, these partnerships aspire to provide a rich and varied curriculum, instructional practices geared to individual needs, and family education and involvement.

Regular education is the door to learning through which all students are expected to enter; it should be the placement for all students. It is the environment that can enable students to be appreciated for their varied learning styles. It is the educational context to empower all school

personnel. It offers a climate in which to celebrate the diversity of all students and creates an environment for the enhancement and support for learning and socialization.

Special education should be viewed as an integral part of the regular education system and a contributor to the education of those students who have special needs. Consider that it is only within the framework of regular education that a student can be afforded the broadest range of skills and learning experiences that are essential to his/her development.

The partnership we aspire to offers an opportunity for collaboration to foster differentiated instruction to accommodate all students in general education while measuring the efficacy of inclusion through the progress of our students and feedback from our school colleagues and parents/guardians. Together, regular and special education can address student learning by providing a rich, varied curriculum, instructional practices geared to individual needs, and family education and involvement.

For all teachers, inclusionary classrooms give teachers an opportunity to foster teaching practices so that all students have the opportunity to access, participate, and grow in an academic environment that is meaningful and successful.

While no school is perfect, Dedham's programs and services for students illustrate what can be accomplished which schools have high expectations for their special education students, ensure access to the general curriculum, and provide necessary supports for success. Close collaboration between parents/guardians, regular and special education teachers, strong professional development programs, and a willingness to change practices and programs to meet ever changing needs are some common strategies used for thinking towards the future. Our staff believe that daily encounters among students, teachers and parents/guardians change lives. Subtle or profound, each event and interaction sets progress off in new and positive directions.

Welcome back.



Elizabeth O'Connell

Director of Special Education

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E-mail Address: _____

Name of Student: _____